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Health &amp; Place

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# The effects of colours, shapes and boundaries of landscapes on perception, emotion and mentalising processes promoting health and well-being

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 14 February 2015

Received in revised form

25 May 2015

Accepted 25 May 2015

## Keywords:

Blue space

Mental health

Therapeutic landscapes

Perceptual processes

Mentalising

## ABSTRACT

Place has a special characteristic – a physical visual shape – that operates as an intensive visual idea. Drawing from the 'therapeutic landscape' concept (Gesler, 1992), this study focuses on the clients in a psychiatric clinic in Switzerland and how they experience place through a psychotherapeutic painting and autobiographical narration process. Based on an inductive qualitative approach, the narratives are structured in an open coding process orientated toward 'blue' and 'green' space, based on the space and place discourse of Relph (1976). Two dimensions of Relph's (1976) 'perceptual and existential' space exist in the narratives of the clients: firstly an individual dimension associated with perception and feelings, with meaning and symbolism, as well as with health and wellbeing; and secondly, a place-landscape dimension with diversification of colours, shapes and borders. In the interaction between individuals and place and landscape, a perceptual, emotional, mentalising process emerges that contributes meaningfully to health and well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

The restorative effects of places on health and well-being are well documented (Ulrich, 1983, 1984, 1993; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Hartig and Staats, 2003; Nilsson et al., 2007) and have led to framework concepts such as the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984), the Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989) and the concept of therapeutic landscapes (Gesler, 1992). Gesler's work emphasised that the positive meanings people attach to place contribute to sustaining health and well-being. To this effect, place matters in relation to lived experience, emotional ties and meanings (Macintyre et al., 2002).

The objective of my study was to better understand how individuals relate to specific places, and in particular how visually triggered perception, emotion and mentalising impact on sense of place and place identity (Lengen and Kistemann, 2012; Rose, 2012; Relph, 1976, 2008; National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the National Research Council (NRC), 1965). Visual characteristics of landscape such as colour, shape, depth, and horizontal and vertical structures, are deeply engraved in our being (Cresswell, 2004; Sacks, 2010; Ryan, 2012). Visual structures of landscape also have social and cultural meaning (Rapoport, 1972; Ilich, 1986; Foley, 2010). To know more about this phenomenon, I decided to ask my clients about their place experiences. I know my clients well and accompany them as their clinical doctor and one of their

psychotherapist in a residential private psychiatric clinic with a public mandate near Zurich, Switzerland. I interviewed them not in their capacity as mentally ill people, but as individuals in the therapeutic process who have developed confidence in the researcher, and who should therefore have more confidence in the research process than if they were cooperating with relative strangers (Kearns and Collins, 2012). Additionally, the following reasons also led me to interview 20 of 152 clients, which our psychotherapeutic treatment team has seen in 2009–10: First, from the psychotherapeutic narratives and the discussions of life histories, I realised how important and emotionally loaded the places of the clients were. Secondly, I observed how the clients moved in the clinical setting, where they rested and how often they walked into the nature outside the clinic, which is situated in the rural portion of the metropolitan area of Zurich. Thirdly, after around eight weeks of therapy (psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioural, schema, art and/or physiotherapy), the clients were familiar with a self-reflection process, which I appreciated as a rare but valuable opportunity to learn more about sense of place and place identity. Finally, the clients selected for the study were about to leave the clinic, being considered healed with regard to their psychiatric diagnosis by the treatment team. Therefore, I expected the same cognitive, emotional and behavioural conditions in the interviewing process as with participants of the general population.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2015.05.016>

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Narratives are a form of biographical research which seek a better understanding of 'how, why and for what [individuals] transform themselves during their lives' (Finger, 1989, p. 1). The potential of autobiographical narratives for accessing 'stored knowledge' in research on geographies of health is well-known (Bruner, 1990; Milligan et al., 2011). From clinical and psychotherapeutic work there exists a valuable opportunity for autobiographical narratives, which 'elicit important insights' (Milligan et al., 2011) into the place and landscape comprehension of clients. For some clients, art therapy is an important opportunity to express their cognitive and emotional state as well as their personality and cultural background in a visualised form. Being in an associative, specifically pictorial cognitive process, painting provides a means of showing and discussing conscious and unconscious themes developed across the life history. Complementary to the psychodynamic processes which emerge in the narratives, in art therapy the internal physical, emotional and cognitive states are externalised in an imaging, visualising and painting process, which allows the psychotherapist to interact with the client and to initiate therapeutic change (Fenner, 2011). The approach of art therapy involves creativity, uncovers and handles emotional conflicts, creates self-awareness, and encourages humanism and personal growth (Wadson et al., 1989). Furthermore, in contrast to participants of the general population, many psychiatric clients are familiar with this psychotherapeutic method.

In this study I focus on the visual characteristics of places and landscapes and aim to reflect the role of interaction between the individual and landscapes concerning the core dimensions of sense of place and place identity: perception, emotion, cognition, behaviour and meaning (Lengen and Kistemann, 2012). The results are structured based on an inductive qualitative process of the paintings and narratives of the clients, who have responded to their own place. The discussion combines literature from a number of different disciplines especially phenomenological approaches of human geography, as well as neuropsychological and psychoanalytical approaches of visual perception, imagination and mentalising with the latent structures of the narratives and paintings of the clients.

In the remainder of this introductory section, I provide an overview of the perceptual (especially visual and emotional) theories of place and landscape which I used for this study, with the concept of 'blue or green space' (Völker and Kistemann, 2011; Ashbullby et al., 2013) developed from the space and place discourses of Relph (1976).

## 2. Landscape as a visual idea of place

With each place we have experienced – where we were born and grew up, where we moved to, where we live now – we have developed a deep but mostly unconscious sense of place and identification with place (Relph, 1976, 2008; Hay, 1998; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2006). Physical, social and cultural place experiences are engraved on our existence. Based on our actions and intentions, and the meanings and symbols of places, we develop an existential consciousness. To develop consciousness we use a relationship to another subject or another object that gives meaning and that we can remember, feel and imagine. Places and their meanings are important to provide the context of these objects and features of the world (Relph, 1976; Lengen and Kistemann, 2012). Place is a part of the 'essence of existence', of 'Dasein', of the way humans exist in the world (Heidegger, 1927). 'Da' means 'there' or 'here' and is an aspect of place. The way in which we investigate and discuss this ontology in the sense of place and place identity approach – is at heart, phenomenological. Heidegger

(1927, p. 35) postulated that 'ontology is only possible in phenomenology'. The term 'phenomenology' has a visual, perceptual and imaginal characteristic. This can be seen deep in the roots of the word 'phenomenon', which derives from the Greek word φαίνεσθαι meaning 'sich zeigen', to 'arise', to 'show', to 'appear'. In this sense 'phenomenon' is the 'Sich-an-ihm-selbst-zeigende', the 'what shows itself in itself' (Heidegger, 1927, p. 28). Concerning the word λογος Heidegger (1927, p. 32) also discussed an aspect of 'let it be seen', of 'Sehenlassen' through speech. The 'Dasein' as 'being in the place' appears as a phenomenon, which we can 'let be seen' through the λογος. In this sense, the physical visual shape of landscape is a phenomenon of place (Relph, 1976, p. 30) and a visual aspect of 'Dasein'. Landscape is bound to an immediate and intuitive perception and meaning of place. Arguably, not everywhere is landscape, but landscape exists primarily where people have a picture, an idea of landscape. Landscape is an aesthetic emotional construction and a part of the 'Lebenswelt' (life-world, Schutz, 1967). In visually perceiving a landscape we experience that which can be seen – the material topography of a portion of land, and the way it is seen (Wylie, 2007). In this sense 'Landscape is an intensely visual idea', a phenomenon of place: 'we do not live in landscapes – we look at them' (Cresswell, 2004, p. 10). However, the way we see landscape is complex and there exist different possibilities to 'gaze' on landscape as a 'way of seeing' (Wylie, 2007): the European humanistic gaze based on philosophy, art and science, the European socio-economic gaze, the empirical gaze as well as the gender motivated gaze (Wylie, 2007). In my view the European psychoanalytical as well as the neuropsychological gaze need to be added.

In addition to the landscape as a complete entity, specific characteristics of the landscape such as colour, shape, depth and other aspects are meaningful. The definition of the term 'blue space' as a 'summation of all visible surface waters in a space in analogy to green space' (Völker and Kistemann, 2011, p. 449) is based on the perception of colours such as 'blue' and 'green'. Blue and green space is a metaphor of our sensual, emotional and meaningful experience of water, sky or forest, which constitutes the fascination and attraction of waterscapes for the human. Völker and Kistemann (2011) blue space has aspects of Relph's (1976) 'primitive', 'perceptual' and 'existential' space, place and landscape meaning. 'Primitive' space is based on unselfconsciously individual body experiences, beginning at the foetal stage and based on the development of senses, the neuronal and musculoskeletal system, and advances in childhood through interactions with objects and places. Relph (1976, p. 9) emphasised the 'deep and presymbolic differentiation of and attachment to place that is perhaps a biological rather than a peculiarly human characteristic'.

'Perceptual space' is an advancement of the 'primitive space' in relationship to objects, places and landscapes, which enables a 'sophisticated abstraction and selfconsciousness' (Relph, 1976, p. 10), with different levels of both abstraction and awareness. Relph postulated that the 'most immediate form of awareness' the 'perceptual space' is 'the egocentric space perceived and confronted by each individual'. The movement of the human body in relation to an object or a place gives a perception and experience of colour, shape, distance and direction which are characteristics of a limited, finite, heterogeneous, subjective, perceived space. Additionally, 'perceptual space' is also 'the realm of direct emotional encounters with the spaces of the earth, sea, and sky or with built and created space' (Relph, 1976, p. 10). We live in this space, we project our personality into it, and we develop emotional bonds to it (Matoré, 1962; Gebhard, 2009). Based on human intentions and imagination, the 'perceptual space' always has substance. Such a 'substantive space' is 'the blue of the sky as a frontier between the visible and the invisible; it is the emptiness of the desert, a space of death; it is the frozen space of an ice bank; ... the depressing

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